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The Alderson Years

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Editor's note: Professor Heffernan's article is an excerpt from a larger work, "Banners, Brothels, and a 'Ladies Seminary': Women and Federal Corrections," first presented at the Conference on the History of Federal Corrections in March 1991. The full paper traces the influence on corrections of the Progressive movement and the struggle for women's suffrage; this excerpt examines the early years of Alderson and the repercussions of that experience on the Bureau's institutions for women through World War II.

James V. Bennett, for 27 years director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, in his memoirs, begins the chapter "Women Behind Bars" with the statement: "No one has really known what to do with the few women who are condemned to prison, least of all the federal government." He comments later that with the "leniency," "mercy," and "favorable treatment" that women receive in the courts and corrections, he is led "to wonder why the public paid so much attention to such a relatively insignificant sector" of crime and corrections.

The early publications of the Bureau of Prisons reflected that "insignificance." Bureau staff, inmates, and programs were exclusively identified as male, with the few exceptions in which women (3.9 percent of the prisoners in 1930) were designated a "problem." With the creation of the Bureau in 1930, women moved into a new status in Federal corrections.

Alderson, West Virginia, the first Federal institution for women, opened in 1927, predating the founding of the Federal Bureau of Prisons by 3 years. At that time, the few Federal wardens operated largely independently; it was not until several years after the founding of the new agency that directors Sanford Bates and James V. Bennett were able to exercise effective control over the wardens. One of the most independent-minded wardens was Mary Belle Harris of Alderson.

Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt played an important role in laying the groundwork for the Bureau of Prisons. By the end of her tenure in the Department of Justice, denied the Federal judgeship that she had expected as a reward for her competence, commitment, and loyalty, Willebrandt watched the political influence of women wane and her contributions be attributed to others. In 1929, in response to an editorial recommending that the newly formed Bureau be taken out of her jurisdiction, she wired Attorney General William D. Mitchell:

I think you owe it to me to make a statement of facts...that it is due solely to my labor and vision that the prison bureau is reclassified into a scientific major bureau.... As a monument to my hard work...a first offender's reformatory has been established at Chillicothe...a modern women's institution established at Alderson...and industries started at Leavenworth...I can no longer

endure the belittling of my part in every accomplishment resulting from years of devoted labor...[and it is] unjust to give you, a newcomer to the whole problem, sole credit and picture me as a danger to prisons.

In turn, in his memoirs, Bennett attributes the passage of appropriations for Alderson to President Calvin Coolidge's recommendation in his State of the Union Address, with no mention of Willebrandt's role.

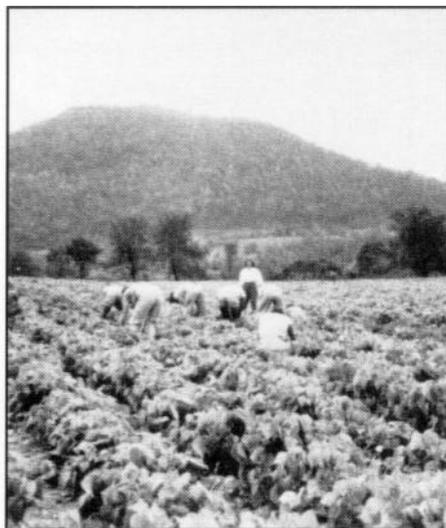
In the critical years from 1925 to 1929, while Willebrandt remained at the Department of Justice and fought for the needed appropriations, Mary Belle Harris developed her "grand experiment" at the new institution at Alderson, West Virginia. At a cost of \$2.5 million (with the aid of male prisoners brought from Leavenworth and Atlanta and housed in an adjoining camp), 14 cottages (segregated by race), each containing a kitchen and rooms for about 30 women, were built in a horseshoe pattern on two tiered slopes. Administrative buildings and cottages were named in honor of Katherine B. Davis, Mabel Walker Willebrandt, Ellen Foster, and Elizabeth Fry—all important figures in the history of corrections.

According to Eugenia C. Lekkerkerker, writing in 1931, "it is undoubtedly the largest and best equipped reformatory that exists." However, she voiced some concerns that have a familiar ring to contemporary observers: the heterogeneity of the population—rural South to industrial North, "white and colored, Indian and Mexican, Chinese and Japanese women"; the nature of Federal

offenses, which brought “a large number of drug addicts into the reformatory”; and “the difficulty of contact with the communities from which the women come, with their families and other social relations.” Despite the myth that Alderson opened its doors with moonshining women from the hills of West Virginia, in the first year of operation before its formal “opening” on November 14, 1928, 174 women had been sent to Alderson from State prisons and jails, 119 of whom were drug law violators, while only 1.5 had violated prohibition laws. A.H. Conner, in his testimony in 1929, commented that “70 to 80 per cent...were coming suffering from social diseases” so that “we can not use them around the dairy and the kitchens and until they are cured they can not be put at any hard physical labor.” Hospitalization rather than industry appeared to be the first need at Alderson.

Mary Belle Harris, in her autobiography *I Knew Them in Prison* (1936), describes the development of an individualized classification system, the institution of inmate self-government with Co-operative Clubs, and her insistence that the “warders” in each cottage be included in decisionmaking and the classification process. Educational classes were begun (segregated by race for the 20 percent “colored”), ranging from English and arithmetic to table service, elementary agriculture, stenography, and typewriting, and capped with Bible study and elementary and advanced Americanization (developed for immigrants, the latter stressed civics and home economics).

Determined that drug addicts were not “hopeless,” Harris emphasized the need for withdrawal under medical supervision



Farm work was an integral part of life at Alderson during its early decades.

and individualized treatment under the joint watch of the staff and the inmate members of the Co-operative Clubs. Bird and Tree Clubs, pageants and plays, athletic teams, and well-censored movies enlivened leisure hours after the women’s work on the farm, on the cottages and grounds, and in Alderson’s garment industry. Harris quotes an inmate as saying: “This is the goin’est place I ever saw.” With an annual Country Fair, which exhibited the works of the cottages and industries and the wares of the farm, Harris brought the local community, as well as the members of the Advisory Board, into her open institution.

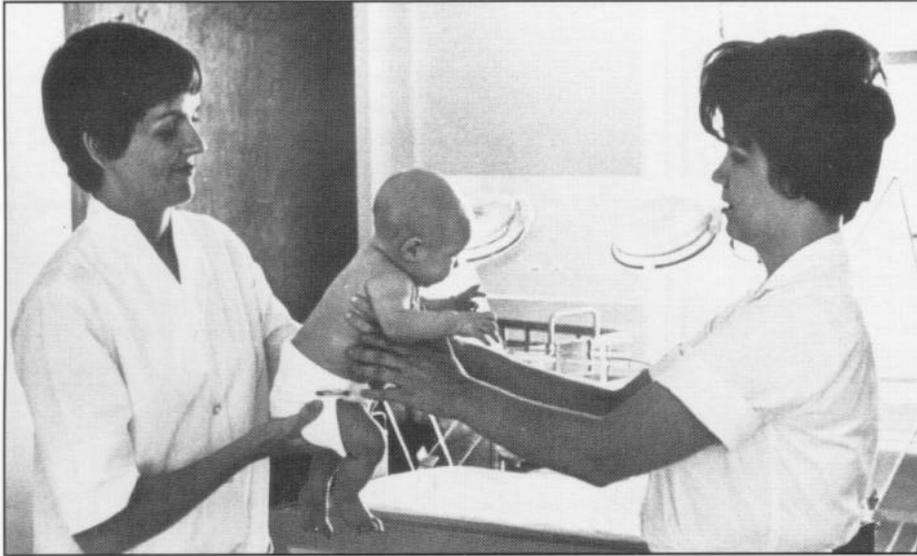
In fact, the “excellent treatment” and the “wonderful buildings” for the women offenders led Representative William F. Kopp in the 1929 hearings (in addition to calling Alderson a “women’s seminary”) to wonder “whether or not it would rather unfit them for meeting the world—when you send them back to the household duties of ordinary homes...they might lose courage and want to get back to Alderson again.” However, Bennett, in

his famous 1928 report on “The Federal Penal and Correctional Problem” for the U.S. Bureau of Efficiency (the ancestor of the Office of Management and Budget), described Alderson as “a complete and self-sufficient institution capable of adequately caring for all Federal women prisoners for some years to come.” He praised the “modem” facility as representing “the best thought in penological methods.”

In Bennett’s discussion of the need for specialized Federal institutions for men, he noted that Alderson’s cottage plan “permits the individual treatment of women” with “their segregation into groups and cottages, by classes or types.” However, he added a cautionary note that became a major point of dispute and a continuing issue in the Bureau: “Will [the Federal Industrial Institution for Women] be able to handle successfully all the women who are committed to it?”

Claudine SchWeber’s excellent research on the early history of Alderson summarizes the key issues for a woman’s institution after the creation of the Bureau of Prisons:

After 1930 Alderson’s relations to its superiors were characterized by continual conflict from which few areas were immune. In part, the struggle flowed from the Bureau’s push to consolidate its authority and to limit institutional autonomy. In part, it flowed from the fact that “in many instances, the only point in the whole system where the [Bureau] met any resistance was at [Alderson].” Most important, the men at the Bureau disagreed with the women of Alderson’s contention that as a women’s institution it should be



Alderson's nursery during the 1960's, its last years of operation.

exempt from many policies and practices that had been devised for the largely male inmate population of the system. Whereas Alderson's correctional superiors in the 1920's included a powerful woman, Willebrandt, who agreed with the women-oriented approach, leadership of the Bureau of Prisons during the 1930's was composed of men who did not. Conflict was inevitable.

Ironically, the "women-oriented" approach of Alderson in classification, specialized programs for drug addiction, forms of inmate self-government, unit management, and cottage-style open institutions became the pride of the Bureau of Prisons—but only when they became Bureau policy and were instituted in male institutions. The early introduction of Classification Boards in the Bureau provides an interesting

example of the process. In *Federal Offenders 1933-34*, Warden Hill of Lewisburg Penitentiary proudly reports on the new policy that "this is possibly the only prison in the United States where every prisoner who has ever entered it has been required to appear before such a Board." Superintendent Harris (who fought the title of warden until 1937), in her section of the report, notes that at Alderson, where this had been the practice since the opening of the institution, not only does each new commitment come before the Board, but every woman in the institution is reviewed every 3 months! In *Federal Offenders 1935-36*, Harris comments that Alderson's classification process is "shaping its activities to conform with the general classification program of the department."

Interestingly, regarding those aspects of Alderson that were truly "women-oriented"—the cottage-centered kitchens and the presence of a nursery—Harris was either relatively silent or somewhat defensive. In *Federal Offenders 1930-31* she commented:

A few years ago, there was a sentimental outcry against dooming the inmates of correctional institutions to the drudgery of the kitchen and of domestic service. My experience here and in other institutions has been that most women are grateful [sic] for the opportunity to learn how to keep house well.

She concludes by noting there is a good defense for training women "and men, too, for that matter," in basic household skills.

In her regular reports in *Federal Offenders* from 1930 to 1940 (the last issue to include Warden's Reports), there is no direct mention of the nursery at Alderson, and only an occasional reference to the number of births, three in 1940 and a "birth of triplets to a colored inmate" in May 1937. Nor do her memoirs touch this dimension of Alderson's programs. Lekkerkerker's description of Alderson in 1931 includes mention of a "fine maternity cottage." But only in later Bureau of Prisons descriptions of Alderson (1942 and 1957), where it is noted that "the presence of babies in the cottages adds to the homelike atmosphere," do babies and classes in child care become integral to the perception of Alderson as a "women's institution." However, according to Virginia McLaughlin, Alderson's fifth woman warden, in the late 1940's, Helen Hironimus, Alderson's second warden, accompanied her annual reports with pictures of babies to remind the Central Office that the babies were uncounted "inmates," lost in the cost-accounting of the Bureau. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, in her inmate's view of Alderson in the 1950's, mentions that the

babies remained in the cottages with their mothers for a few months, a shorter time than a year or two earlier, but that “the parting of mother and child, especially if she faces a long sentence, was heartrending.”

In the 1960’s, Federal judges were surprised at the number of babies born at Alderson, but were concerned that a difficult pregnancy might mean a 50-mile trip on mountain highways to the nearest specialized hospital. But, according to Virginia McLaughlin, the end of the era came when “two high-powered social workers came down from [the Department of Health, Education and Welfare] and said ‘prison is no place for a child.’” Between the forces of centralization in the Bureau of Prisons, which had difficulty handling a “woman’s institution,” and a “child-saving” perspective that included “saving” a child from an inmate mother, Alderson lost its babies.

While Sanford Bates in 1936 described Harris’ administration as “one of the outstanding accomplishments of the Federal penal system,” Bennett, by 1970, characterized Harris’ tenure as one whose aim was to make Alderson “as nearly as possible like an old-fashioned girl’s school.” Bennett attributed to himself the creation of women’s open institutions and experimentation in self-government. Alderson’s “remote location” was viewed as “a problem for Sanford Bates and the rest of us” trying “to develop a realistic rehabilitation program for women.” Significantly, Harris’ effort to demonstrate that women were as capable as men left her vulnerable to Bates’ and Bennett’s argument that women inmates should be treated “like men.”



The laundry was one of the few “industrial” jobs available for Alderson inmates.

The issue was exemplified in the conflict over whether there was a need for a maximum-security Federal facility for women. Harris’ description in 1936 of Alderson’s “five rooms of reinforced concrete” in the Reception Center and “two small barred cottages” for a possible 48 medium-security women, with accompanying anecdotes on her handling of “resisters and smashers” and “molls,” was in reaction to Bates’ decision in 1933 that:

The conviction of a number of women during the past year for serious and desperate crimes or for aiding gangsters and racketeers has made it necessary to provide a special place for their incarceration in an institution of the maximum security type. The Federal Industrial Institution for Women at Alderson was not designed and is not equipped to handle women who are desperate and incorrigible.

Harris argued that, with inmate cooperation and skillful handling by staff, with very few exceptions—when the good of the institution overruled the needs of the woman—Alderson’s open institution could handle all commitments. She questioned the assumption in Alderson’s enabling legislation that some women were not “reclaimable,” and denied the need for a separate facility for “desperate and incorrigible” women. Nevertheless, as Bates describes in his memoirs, in the newly opened Federal Detention Farm at Milan, Michigan, “a small section of the cell block at Milan has been completely sealed off from the rest of the institution and contains twenty-two cells for women.” In the *Federal Offender* for 1933-34, Bates notes that “they can be adequately guarded by armed officers and housed in the more traditional type of steel cells” with a “matron and number of warders” to “assist the Superintendent in guarding these women.”

In the intervening years, as reported by the warden of Milan in *Federal Offenders 1940*, in addition to the “problem women” the Bureau used the institution for “informers...narcotic addicts, constitutional psychopaths, and homosexuals who were found troublesome elsewhere.” In 1936, a transition year from the administration of Sanford Bates to James Bennett, Bennett called for a maximum-security institution for women: “We need to specialize our institutions for women just as been done for men.” Citing the fact that Alderson was overcrowded, with more than 200 women boarded out at non-Federal institutions under contract, he mentioned that a new jail was planned for Terminal Island in California, which would accommodate 24 women in a wing of a facility built to house 600 men. Despite his call for specialization, the new maximum-security institution as Bennett described it would house



Left to right: Mrs. Henry Morgenthau, wife of the Secretary of the Treasury, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and Alderson Warden Mary Belle Harris, about 1934.

...not only the approximately 250 women who come from western districts at a considerable saving in transportation costs but also accept those most difficult cases originating in other sections of the country...unregenerate keepers of houses of prostitution, gangsters' "molls," and confirmed drug users.

Harris fought back. In her "Report of the Superintendent," following Bennett's "Introduction," she responded:

It seems that the time has come, which was anticipated when this institution was built, to plan for an institution west of the Mississippi, built like this on the cottage plan...to care for a population of 500, and with cottage facilities for 300 at the outset.

The issue was one of principle:

I do not believe that a maximum security institution for women is necessary, and I feel that it would be a decided letting down of our standard if such an institution were proposed. I am convinced that we have made a demonstration here which has set a standard for the country, and that it would be considered a set-back if we should depart from the policy so far adopted here and in well conducted state institutions for women.

However, her argument was weakened by her request that the courts select cases for Alderson "in which there is the greatest possibility of reclamation." By implication, the other women would be contracted to the States.

In 1938 Bennett approached the House Appropriations Committee with a

request for three new institutions—one a women's facility in the Southwest: "It is an extremely expensive and undesirable situation to be forced to transport these women all the way to Alderson." In 1937, more than 1,267 Federal women offenders had been committed from the courts, with 400 sent to Alderson and the rest to State institutions.

A Congressman inquired whether the new women's institution would "be along the line of the Alderson Reformatory, with cottages?" Bennett replied: "It will be more in line with a maximum-security institution." All of the 25 long-term problem women would be taken out of Milan (where they had no exercise space and little employment) and the "drug-addict population" would be divided between Alderson and the new custodial institution. Bennett admitted that "certain women's organizations feel we are discriminating against women prisoners, because there are no facilities, comparable with the facilities at Lexington and Fort Worth, for handling women addicts."

When the new Federal Reformatory for Women officially opened on October 10, 1940, in Seagoville, Texas, it was an open institution. With a capacity for 400 women, situated on farmland, it was built on a cottage plan similar to that of Alderson. It appears that Harris had won—and Bennett lost. How did it happen?

The records are scanty. A 1958 brochure on Seagoville indicated that the first warden (Helen Hironimus—Harris' long-time friend and assistant) "good-naturedly begged, cajoled, and browbeat her Washington superiors into giving her funds for the progressive development of

its plant.” However, it appears that the “great coalition” of Progressive women’s clubs that had helped bring Alderson into being may have been rallied again. In *Federal Offenders 1936-37* Harris described the great celebration in May 1937 of the 10th anniversary of Alderson’s founding. Key participants in the earlier victory, Mabel Walker Willebrandt and Julia K. Jaffrey, as well as the chair of the Public Welfare Committee of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, gave speeches. Bennett was present. In other “Reports” Harris describes Eleanor Roosevelt’s visits and interest in Alderson. There is some indication from the nature of the questions at House Appropriation Hearings that the “heavy artillery” the women’s clubs were able to muster had affected members of the Appropriation Committees as well as the Director of the Bureau of Prisons.

By 1941, when 104 women were at Seagoville, the members of the House Appropriations Committee quizzed Bennett on a \$5,000 item for fencing—was it to keep cattle or people in? Bennett replied that it was to keep cattle in and people out. The Congressmen appeared somewhat startled to discover that the women were doing the farming: “But they drive the tractors?...They bring home the cows and do all the regular farm work?” Bennett replied in the affirmative.

But the history of Seagoville as a woman’s institution was short-lived. In 1941, with the retirement of Mary Belle Harris, Helen Hironimus returned to Alderson as warden. Amy N. Stannard, who had been a member of the Bureau’s



The commissary at Alderson, 1940's.

first parole board, moved from assistant to warden. In March 1942, Seagoville became a Federal Detention Station for Japanese, German, and Italian families. Amy Stannard remained as administrator, but the women staff and inmates returned to Alderson, and the Federal Reformatory for Women ended its short career.

Terminal Island’s first life as a men’s facility with a “wing for women” also came to an end with World War II. In 1940 Bennett reported to the members of the House Appropriations Committee that Milan’s “notorious cases” had been transferred to Terminal Island. The removal of the women from Milan brought the number of women at Terminal Island to 56. According to the warden’s report in *Federal Offenders 1940*, while vocational training for the men was limited, vocational training for women was “progressing nicely,” with all of the women inmates enrolled in

“one or more of the following: music, sewing, knitting, dressmaking, weaving, laundry work and nursing.”

The next year at the appropriation hearings, a Congressman raised the question: “What was the reason for having women at Terminal Island? Was there any effort to move them to any other place?” Bennett responded: “Yes, sir. We are moving these women to Dallas. We put them at Terminal Island simply because we had no other place to put them.” With the closing of Terminal Island and Seagoville in 1942, some of the women were put in non-Federal institutions, and the others joined the women at Alderson.

Fifteen years after its founding, Alderson was once again the only Federal institution for women offenders. Ironically, during World War II, the “ladies seminary” performed the function that during World War I transformed former brothels into Federal detention centers for women. With the passage of the “May Act,” patterned after the World War I antivice legislation, as a contribution to the war effort, Alderson became the temporary “home” for several hundred women arrested for prostitution in military areas. In 1945, it was reported that 52 percent of the women committed to Alderson that year suffered from venereal disease. Perhaps the situation can best be described as providing a final twist to the end of an era for women in Federal corrections. ■

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